

Public-Private Microschooling Partnerships: The Southern Nevada Urban Micro Academy Model

By Ashley Campbell and Don Soifer

April 2021

Key Points

- The Southern Nevada Urban Micro Academy (SNUMA) is a first-of-its-kind partnership between the North Las Vegas city government and an innovation-focused education nonprofit to create microschools, operated entirely outside of incumbent public school systems and designed specifically as an in-person solution for city families to counter pandemic learning loss.
- SNUMA microschools produced academic learning gains that surpassed those of local public schools—and at a fraction of their average, per-pupil funding levels.
- This report outlines the successful SNUMA model and explains how it could be scaled nationally.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, many residents of North Las Vegas had long felt mistreated by the Clark County School District (CCSD), the country's fifth-largest school district by enrollment.¹ Families had expressed frustrations with school district decisions and management, quite often for good reason.

In pre-pandemic times, less than half of all children in North Las Vegas were learning at a rate that would produce proficiency in math and English language arts through graduation. District-run neighborhood schools in North Las Vegas posted academic growth rates below CCSD averages as measured on the Nevada School Performance Framework.²

COVID-19 only exacerbated things. When CCSD transitioned to virtual learning in the early months

of the pandemic, of the children who never logged in, nearly 40 percent were from North Las Vegas. Early in the 2020–21 school year, North Las Vegas students, who comprise only about 10 percent of the district population, were responsible for about one-fourth of its absences.³

In response, the forward-thinking municipality of North Las Vegas took the opportunity presented by the COVID-19 crisis to create a new educational option for its residents: microschooling.

Microschooling is not unique to North Las Vegas. Across the nation, families are opting to microschool out of their homes with small, multi-family groups of around 10 kids. These microschools look different depending on each group's needs and resources. Some focus solely on academics, while others blend in various enrichment programs. Some

microschools have one guide teaching the children, and some share the responsibility among parents.

What is distinct about the North Las Vegas microschooling model is that it uses a first-of-its-kind public-private partnership—the Southern Nevada Urban Micro Academy (SNUMA). During the summer before the 2020–21 school year, the city contracted with the nonprofit Nevada Action for School Options⁴ to create and operate microschools designed to confront learning loss in its recreation centers and libraries. SNUMA serves city residents and the children of first responders and frontline personnel who were looking for a safe in-person place for their children to learn during the pandemic, at no cost to families.

If done deliberately, the SNUMA model could be a powerful option for employers and municipalities to serve their employees and residents.

How the Partnership Works

The City of North Las Vegas funds the program out of its municipal budget, initially bolstered by funding from the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act. By using buildings it already owns and maintains, the city can keep costs to less than a third of the per-pupil funding levels in the CCSD.

The city is an active partner, providing breakfast and lunch, staff responsible for managing student pickup and drop-off, desktop computers with IT services, and other necessary supports.

Participating families have learned about SNUMA through dedicated promotional outreach by the city, public events, and the microschool's Facebook page. The parents and guardians of all participating children have registered as homeschoolers under provisions of Nevada law and have removed their children from their CCSD school or state charter school. Children at SNUMA generally reflect the broader demographic characteristics of North Las Vegas and arrived demonstrating the lower-than-average academic proficiency levels on par with student averages at CCSD.

Children attend a structured schooling program five days per week that follows the school district's calendar, in full compliance with all government health-safety requirements and pandemic-related mandates. They learn in classrooms capped at

15 socially distanced learners on city-provided desktop computers.

Nevada Action for School Options manages the teaching and learning, relying on a range of strategies developed in high-performing personalized learning classrooms around the nation. SNUMA uses a hybrid learning model, combining whole-group, small-group, and one-on-one in-person instruction with digital content.

Children in first and second grade use curriculum based on that developed by Arizona-headquartered Prenda, augmented by SNUMA's leadership. Grades three through eight use the curriculum provided by Cadence Learning. This content was developed with learning loss in mind. One of the features of the curriculum that has proved popular with SNUMA's families is the strong social-justice core, which builds on a sequence of award-winning, grade-level-appropriate novels with protagonists from different cultural backgrounds and experiences, while building reading comprehension and involved individual analysis and group discussions.

Both models work well with personalized learning tools meant to meet each child where they are, such as Lexia, DreamBox, and Zearn. All SNUMA learners work to meet individual learning goals, which SNUMA's education leaders choose weekly, to accelerate their progress returning to grade-level mastery.

The results have been encouraging. In August 2020, only 22 percent of children began the school year at SNUMA at or above grade level. At the end of the first semester, 62 percent of children were at or above grade level in literacy, with similar results in math.⁵

Children in third grade have seen some of the highest academic growth. At the start of the program, only 29 percent of third grade children were at or above grade level in literacy, and at the close of the first semester, 42 percent were at grade level and 28 percent were above grade level in literacy.⁶

This partnership serves the children not only academically but also socially. The children get to engage meaningfully and responsibly with—and learn from—each other. Physical recreation time, projects fostering critical thinking, and fun are all integral to the SNUMA experience—something that mattered immensely to families while the whole school district was operating only virtually.

Scaling the Model

This microschooled model is adaptable and can be used in a variety of settings, including employers looking to help their employees with schooling options for their children, churches working with their congregations and communities, and other municipalities. A wide range of locations are suitable for microschooled, from empty office buildings to church rooms to rec centers and libraries.

The whole concept, even the municipal services contract that created SNUMA, bringing together knowledgeable education leaders, capable managers, and forward-thinking government leaders, is elegantly simple. As such, it is an attractive solution to a massive, common problem: oversized, mismanaged county school districts whose ineffectiveness threatens the future livelihoods of their own communities.

At first, SNUMA met with sharp resistance from some in or aligned with school district leadership, who publicly worried about the complications family withdrawals from underperforming district schools would present for future budget cycles. Critics scrutinized state education laws, seeking any statutory lines this radical new model may have crossed. As more state officials visited SNUMA and observed its success firsthand, such challenges have waned.

Nonetheless, leaders in different states who are considering adopting their own public-private microschooled partnership models should search their states' statutory and regulatory infrastructure

for prohibitions or obstacles that could be addressed early in the planning process.

Partnership microschooled using the SNUMA model should appeal to conservatives for several reasons. They are substantially less expensive than most existing schooling models and much more productive in terms of inputs and outcomes. They are nimble and able to meet the evolving needs of small groups of learners in ways that even charter schools struggle to do. They can operate outside the regulatory tentacles of public school systems and the lawmakers and regulators who incessantly complicate schooling.

And most importantly, they are what families want. When asked if they would return to traditional public school when it reopened, the majority of the parents who have children participating in SNUMA responded that they would prefer their children stay at SNUMA. One parent stated on a formal survey, "I think SNUMA is as strong or stronger academically due to smaller class size, more personalized attention, self-paced learning. I can see kids achieving much more in this type of setting than in a traditional school."

Born as a necessary, rational response to the pandemic, partnership microschooled like SNUMA are not going away with the end of this school year. The model is well suited to be a reasonable alternative to large, underperforming county school districts going forward, and it should be championed by any seeking new options for families underserved by present systems.

About the Authors

Ashley Campbell is chief of staff of Nevada Action for School Options.

Don Soifer is the president and founder of Nevada Action for School Options. He is a longtime education researcher and policy writer, charter school authorizing board member, and advocate for innovative schooling solutions and the policies that support them.

The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author. They do not purport to reflect the opinions or views of AEI or the series coordinator, Frederick M. Hess.

Notes

1. US Census Bureau, “Top 10 Largest School Districts by Enrollment and Per Pupil Current Spending,” May 21, 2019, <https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/2019/comm/largest-school-districts.html>.
2. Kelle Snow, “Measuring Student Academic Growth in Clark County,” March 2021, Nevada Action for School Options, <https://nevadaaction.org/mgpnv/>.
3. Brandon Paykamian, “Microschool’ Helps Students Struggling with Virtual Education,” Government Technology, February 2, 2021, <https://www.govtech.com/education/k-12/Microschool-Helps-Students-Struggling-With-Virtual-Education.html>.
4. Both authors work for Nevada Action for School Options.
5. *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, “Southern Nevada Urban Micro Academy Posts Impressive Academic Gains,” December 22, 2020, <https://www.reviewjournal.com/opinion/editorials/editorial-southern-nevada-urban-micro-academy-posts-impressive-academic-gains-2229350/>.
6. Jordan Gartner, “North Las Vegas Extends Southern Nevada Urban Micro Academy into 2021,” KTNV Las Vegas, December 17, 2020, <https://www.ktnv.com/news/north-las-vegas-extends-southern-nevada-urban-micro-academy-partnership-into-2021>.

© 2021 by the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research. All rights reserved.

The American Enterprise Institute (AEI) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, 501(c)(3) educational organization and does not take institutional positions on any issues. The views expressed here are those of the author(s).